

1st Theater Sustainment Command officer of Afghan rail advisory team, deputy director of Rail Port 4, and Afghan interpreter discuss existing Rail Port 4 infrastructure on map developed by Transportation Engineering Agency, part of Surface Deployment Distribution Command (U.S. Army/Timothy Lawn)



Strategic Planning

A “How-to” Guide

By C.V. Christianson and George Topic

The process of developing and writing a strategic plan is widely regarded as the most challenging and frustrating task that leaders and managers are called on to execute. It is rare for senior executives, military commanders, and agency directors, and by extension their subordinates and team members, to go long without facing this requirement. It not only calls for focused effort for extended periods but can also be highly stressful.

Despite how often such efforts are undertaken, it is remarkable how little effective guidance and assistance are available to help organizations with strategic plan writing aside from the legions of consultants who are only too happy to offer their support. There are many fine companies and talented people who engage in the business of writing strategic plans and/or facilitating efforts for their clients. There are also clear and often significant limitations to “external” support

efforts, which is not to say that these assessments cannot be exceedingly valuable in some cases. What is certain is that an effective strategic plan cannot be developed without the sustained commitment and effort of the leaders of the organization and the cooperation of major stakeholders, both present and future.

This process is so challenging because teams and leaders need to ask and discuss—and answer—many difficult questions. And in some cases these questions are unanswerable. Ironically, answers are not always necessary; a satisfactory payoff on the investment of time and energy can sometimes result merely

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from the process itself. Such endeavors are not without risk. Ill-conceived or poorly managed efforts can do great harm and even catastrophic damage.

For those who sit down to start this process, there are not many simple resources available to guide them through what can either be arduous and painful or enlightening and uplifting. The intent of this article is to offer a framework for starting the process of developing a strategic plan and proposing several ideas about strategic planning in general. At the Center for Joint and Strategic Logistics, we are regularly involved in assisting senior leaders and organizations in strategic planning. The concepts and thoughts here are distilled from a wide variety of these efforts over the past several years. We also identify pitfalls we have seen both in processes and products that illustrate some of the challenging aspects of strategic planning. At a minimum, we offer a starting point for those who begin the process by staring disconsolately at a blank sheet or a white board.

Why Bother?

The first question to ask and understand is related to the plan itself: Why are we writing a strategic plan at all? Hopefully, it is not because we are required to have one every X years. If that is the principal reason, whatever is written will likely remain just as unread as its predecessors. More likely, strategic plans are developed because of recognition of significant changes in the external and/or internal environments or under direction from senior leaders. In the latter case, this is presumably a well-reasoned judgment that a new plan is necessary because the leader sees or understands something that might not be obvious to everyone. In any event, it is important for every participant to understand the impetus for the effort. It is also useful to refer back to this question and the answers during the development, writing, and implementation of the plan.

Starting with “Why?”

This seems fundamental, but we have found asking “Why?” to be the most challenging part of the strategic plan

developing process. In many and perhaps even most cases, those involved in the process do not really comprehend what strategic plan development means. Smart and well-meaning senior leaders often struggle with identifying the essence of their organization’s reason for being—and in many cases, they have had long associations with their organizations. In fact, sometimes it is the length of the association that inhibits leaders’ ability to see this essence or in some instances to understand the question.

It would be ideal if there were a well-reasoned, logical, easy-to-follow process guaranteed to produce a slick, pithy phrase that encapsulated the answer to the why question. Sadly there is not. However, participants should recognize that the very process of struggling with this question offers insights that can assist in developing many parts of the plan and that a collective realization is likely to form that approximates an answer even if it cannot fit neatly on a bumper sticker.

Simon Sinek’s excellent book *Start with Why* and video clip from a 2009 TED conference offer a useful introduction to how to think about the why question.¹ While there is no “one size fits all” solution, Sinek’s approach can be used as an “icebreaker” to help start thinking about the central issues a strategic plan must address. He uses a pattern he calls the golden circle to describe how some leaders and organizations have been able to achieve a disproportionate influence while others have not. He defines three concentric circles. The outside circle is “*what* we do.” Sinek postulates that every organization on the planet knows what it does—that is easy to identify. Moving toward the center, the next circle is “*how* we do what we do.” This circle is not as obvious as the *what* circle and is often used to describe differentiations from one organization to another. The center circle is “*why* we do what we do.” Sinek states that few individuals or organizations can clearly articulate their why—that is, their purpose.

We have distilled Sinek’s pattern or framework into the following basic

questions around which this portion of the process should generally revolve:

- Why does the organization exist? Why is it there and why should anyone care? This is the *purpose* of the organization.
- What guiding principles do we embrace? This describes how we do what we do by identifying the core beliefs that define organizational culture and behavior.
- What do we do? This describes our mission (this is harder to answer than it might seem) and what essential elements and critical tasks are necessary for success.

If everyone agrees to the answers to these questions, the rest of the process should be relatively straightforward.

Environmental Scan

This step is easy to start but hard to finish. There are forces beyond an organization’s control that affect its ability to achieve mission success and how it conducts its work. There are also conditions within an organization’s span of control that can help shape where to focus effort and influence how to perform the organization’s work. Everyone will have ideas about what the present and future look like as well as impressions of the organization, stakeholders, challenges, risks, and opportunities. Bringing all these impressions together into a collection of focused insights that will facilitate the development of the strategic plan is much tougher. Additionally, it is important to be able to decide how much input is sufficient and to ensure that all voices are given appropriate credence. Those who are not heard at the beginning are unlikely to contribute later.

There are all kinds of different tools, methods, and techniques to help organizations “assess” themselves. Quad charts outlining strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, gap analysis, and stakeholder surveys/analysis can all be useful—or not. An essential aspect of determining what “tools” are right for an organization is continually aligning with the questions/process above.

In our experience, it is useful to divide an environmental scan into external and internal components. While the scans are obviously related, this separation enables a closer look at specific issues that will affect the development of a plan and its implementation. An external scan should generally focus on the broader equities of stakeholders, exogenous factors that are sometimes difficult to predict, and the longer term goals of organizations. For government organizations, especially within the Department of Defense, budget issues, political factors, and major strategic shifts are examples of the kinds of issues central to an external scan.

Internal scans enable planners to assess factors they are more able to control. Additionally, there are invariably issues associated with internal scans that limit or offer opportunities for significant change in any organization. Sometimes they are as clear and simple as budgetary pressures, but they can also be as subtle as cultural mores and the personalities of, or relations among, senior leaders. In both components of the environmental scan, the objective of gaining a reasonable—but not total—consensus and using the answer to the why question are essential to writing a successful plan. In some cases, scans can be used in conjunction with answering the why question or as a less challenging way to begin discussions.

The most critical step in this part of the process is to draw a set of conclusions from both scans that can be used to shape the rest of the strategic plan. The most important part of the scan is to understand *why* a factor is important and *how* it might affect the organization. For example, based on our scans we may conclude that we will not benefit from the same level of resourcing over the next several years. Consequently, we might decide that we must change how we do what we do to succeed in a resource-constrained environment.

Strategic Goals

Armed with a clear and shared understanding of the organization's purpose, and drawing from the conclusions from the scans, the central task of developing a handful of strategic goals becomes

the key task—and the deliverable—in the strategic planning process. We recommend generally three to five goals derived from the conclusions. For these goals to be strategic, they need to be shared by everyone in every part of the organization. President John F. Kennedy famously asked a janitor at NASA what his job was and was told, "I am helping to put a man on the moon!" This clear understanding of the relationship between the tasks this individual performed and the higher level purpose of the organization is the cornerstone of successful strategies. Crafting the words for strategic goals can be challenging and time consuming, which is appropriate since they should be enduring and guide almost every aspect of the organization's operations, prioritization, and resourcing. Generic examples of strategic goals might include:

- Because we concluded that the future is likely to be more uncertain and complex, we may want our organization to become more adaptive.
- Because we concluded from our scans that future success will increasingly depend on other players, we may want our organization and its leaders to focus on building new/better relationships.

Insofar as these sample goals are ostensibly objectives for most organizations, more granularity is obviously required. Similarly, goals such as "focus on our core competencies" are in fact closer to being management imperatives or guiding principles than strategic goals. The key to developing a set of useful strategic goals is to ensure that as a group they clearly enable the organization to achieve its essential purpose in the environment seen in the scans. It is also important, but not always essential, that external stakeholders agree with and support the pursuit of the strategic goals of the organization.

Roles and Responsibilities

Every organization has assigned roles and responsibilities. They may be formal or informal, but they are always present. An effective strategic plan needs to define and refine roles and responsibili-

ties in the context of the purpose, environment, and strategic goals described earlier. These descriptions should provide a clear view of what the "enterprise" looks like and how it operates. This part of the plan also delineates how relationships are defined and managed. At this point, there should also be clear descriptions in the plan of the relationships that are necessary for the success of the organization.

It is also essential to understand and agree on roles and responsibilities with key external entities. These include but are not limited to teammates, partners, stakeholders, and customers. The linkage between "customers" and the organization's purpose is especially important, and it is needed to build and maintain trust. If this does not happen, we should not count on customers' continued patronage.

Implementing Guidance

The final step in developing the plan is to describe the implementing process. This can be detailed and directive or broad and general. In many cases, organizations actually begin their strategic planning processes at this point, which can lead to a disjointed effort at best and damaging guidance to the organization at worst. The often used phrase "If you don't know where you are going, all roads are about the same" is apt for this situation. There are, of course, varying degrees of clarity in such plans, which is an important factor in how clear and/or detailed implementing guidance could/should be. Fundamentally, each organization should strive to harmonize all of its components against the strategic goals it has described.

It is beyond the scope of this article to chronicle all the options for designing "action plans," "Program Objectives and Milestones," "Program Evaluation Review Technique charts," and so forth. Any number of books, articles, consultants, and other resources are available to provide guidance. We would offer one caution, which is to ensure that any and all implementing plans are built around the framework established by the strategic goals. By using these goals as the framework for implementation, an



Air National Guard (ANG) chief of recruiting and retention discusses issues with National Guard senior leaders at ANG Senior Leadership Conference, which offers single forum for senior leaders and unit commanders to exchange ideas and provide field input on critical issues affecting ANG (National Guard/Marvin Preston)

organization has a better chance to build the strongest possible sense of agreement and commitment to the implementation plan methodology and the actions proposed, meaning the strategic goals are more likely to be advanced.

Strategic Communications

The key to communications and strategic planning is to start early, and that must be an element of every part of the plan development process. Waiting until the plan is complete before deciding how to convince everyone it is *their* plan is generally unwise. The essential task is to ensure that each step enjoys clear understanding and broad support both internally and externally. Plan writers will not be the ones integrating, synchronizing, and prioritizing the work/actions of the organization in concert with the goals. Making sure participants are genuinely welcome to voice their concerns and raise questions not only builds support but also produces better results and possibly averts catastrophes. Offering stakeholders a voice in the development and assessment of a plan, or merely allowing them to ask questions, is vital to gaining support. Finally, having open and robust communication channels promotes transparency and demonstrates commitment to the continuous improvement of the plan.

Conclusion

There is a certain irony to writing a “how-to” guide for a process that is as dependent on context as strategic plan development. There are hundreds of factors to consider, and they must obviously be tailored to the needs of the organization and the nature of the mission. How the process is actually conducted, from the use of such techniques as breakout sessions, brainstorming, and team-building activities to the use of internal or external facilitators, are matters that leaders need to consider carefully. The two key elements that should always be present are ensuring that every participant has a chance to be heard and that organizations are building their plans around the reasons they exist.

Let us offer a few more admonitions for those who are embarking on this challenging endeavor. First, this is not a time for senior leaders to bluff or show a lack of candor. The troops will know if leaders believe what they say. Moreover, leaders will depend on all the participants for courage and candor throughout the process. Strategy by nature assumes risk and uncertainty, and a strategic plan must be developed with a clear recognition of these realities. At the end of the day, the effort is designed to make decisions about what “investments” are the best bets for an organization since there will always be

risk. But it falls to leaders to manage that risk and accept the consequences of their judgment and decisions.

There is no school solution or ironclad template for how to develop a strategic plan. Obviously the process needs to be tailored to the needs, culture, and preferences of individual organizations. This article’s greatest value may be in the questions and considerations it raises for those who are involved in, planning, or contemplating such efforts.

We encourage strategic planners to be bold and creative and above all to listen—both to others and to themselves. Planners often fail to hear their own voices and ignore their own visions because they spend all their time cobbling together the equities of everyone else. Finally, nothing is final. The best plans are continually assessed and adjusted as factors change. JFQ

Note

¹ See Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: Portfolio, 2009); and Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” *TED.com*, September 2009, available at <www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.html>.